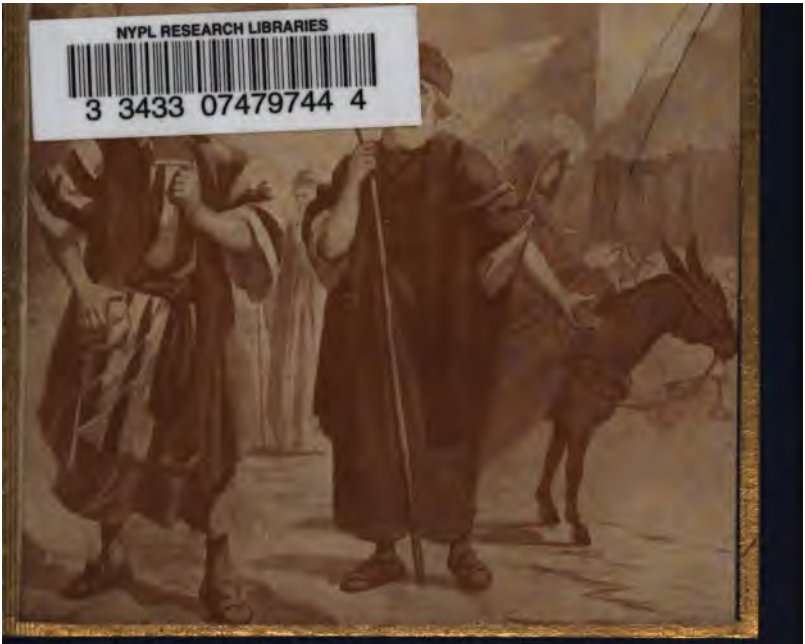
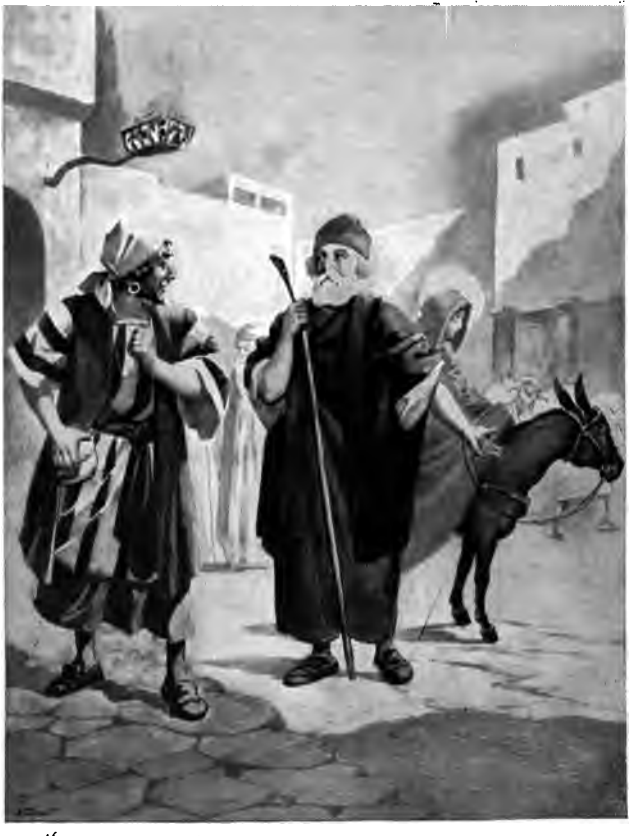


The Strangers

by

G. Bayard Young

Anne Jones



"AND THEN JOSEPH AND MARY APPEARED AT THE INN, AND SOUGHT ADMITTANCE." Page 19.

THE STRANGERS AT THE DOOR

A
CHRISTMAS
STORY

by

G. BAYARD YOUNG

THE CASTLE PRESS
PHILADELPHIA
1.9.1.9

THE STRANGERS AT THE DOOR

THE decree had gone forth! Rome had spoken. Her mandate must be obeyed.

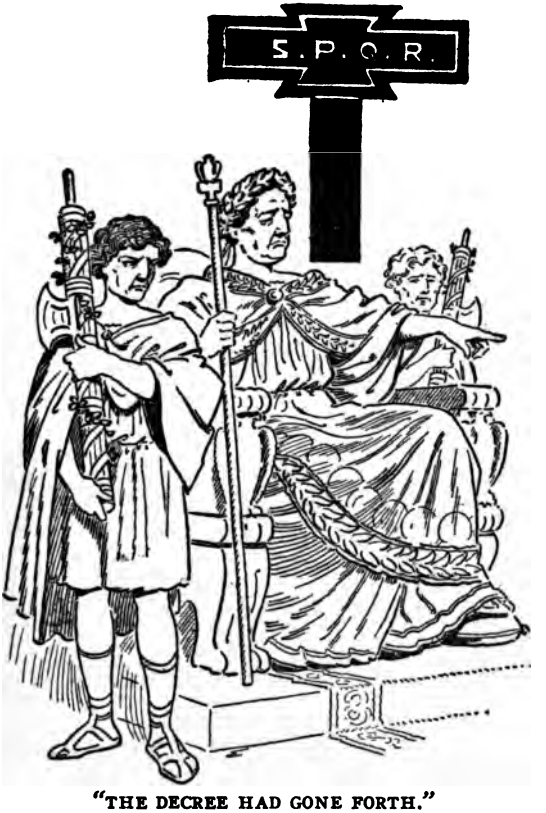
And so, in fear and trembling, each Jewish family sought the place of its nativity, that there a proper registration might be made of all possessions, from the youngest lamb in the field to the finest mansion in the city, and upon the basis of this property the new tax was to be levied.

The whole land was thrown into confusion. From the regions of ancient Tyre and Sidon, from among the foothills of the cedar-crowned Lebanon Mountains, forth from the densely populated cities and villages in the valley of Jezreel and en-

circling the little Sea of Galilee, and far southward to the shores of the Great Sea, moved a steady stream of humanity, impelled by a common impulse.

For a moment these diverging streams met and mingled upon the great Roman highways, and then moved on to their appointed goal.

Among those who came under the power of the Emperor's unalterable decree were two peasants whose home was hidden among the hills of Galilee in the obscure village of Nazareth. They, too, must obey, and so, in company with multitudes of others, they had turned their faces southward. It was a wearisome journey, not only on account of the many miles to be traveled, but especially because of the general irritation and vexation occasioned by the new law. Galling as was the Roman yoke at any time, it seemed thrice burden-



"THE DECREE HAD GONE FORTH."

some in this hour, when every family must forego present and future plans for the time being, and seek the place of its nativity.

But, despite it all, in the eyes of these two peasants who moved ever southward, there shone a light which no darkness could quench. Singularly calm and confident were they. Simple as were their garments, hardened by toil as were their hands, and bronzed as were their faces, still there was about them such a fineness of manner, gentleness of spirit, and nobility of soul, as to make all who knew them show them marked deference. They commanded respect without seeking it. In their veins flowed the blood of a long line of Hebrew kings.

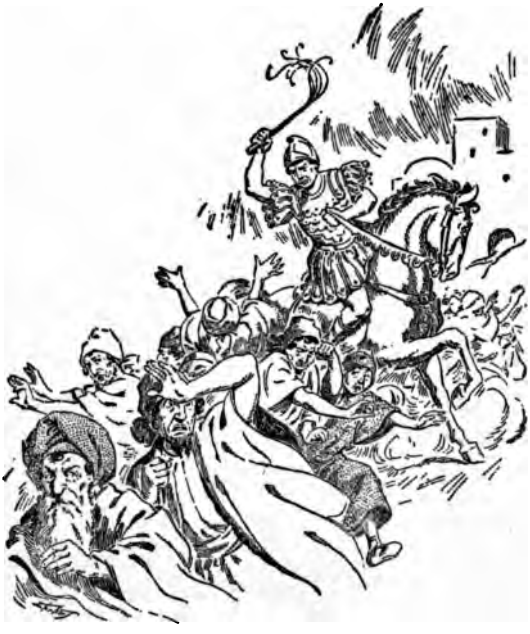
They were lineal descendants of King David, who first sprang into prominence in the nation's history when he slew the giant Goliath. Then it was that the women of

Israel sang, "Saul hath slain his thousands and David his ten thousands." But this first great public victory was only the forerunner of the many to follow, and David's spirit and undaunted heroism were stamped indelibly, not alone upon Joseph, but even more pronouncedly upon Mary, his espoused wife. Firm as were the lines about his mouth, even more firm were those about hers. Difficulties would not dismay him, while to her they were but a challenge.

For some time they had been traveling towards Jerusalem in silence, each wrapped in profound thought, when suddenly Mary said, "What thinkest thou, Joseph? That we shall not find room in the inn? Did I not see a cloud flit across the sky?" Joseph did not wish to add, even in the slightest degree, to the burden which rested alike upon all, and therefore he sought to evade the question.

"'Tis true the crowd is very great, the largest I have ever seen," he said. And then suddenly breaking off the conversation and looking far off across the fields, and far beyond the distant Judean hills, exclaimed, "'Twas along that road you passed when you visited your cousin Elizabeth, was it not?"

That visit! It could never be forgotten. As Joseph spoke, a flood of tender, thrilling memories came to her that made her soul leap for joy. So engrossed was she in recalling the succession of events pertaining to her memorable visit to her cousin Elizabeth and the priest Zacharias, that it seemed as though she had forgotten her original question to Joseph. But had she? With fine chivalry, Joseph sought to beguile her by calling her attention to all that was beautiful in sky and tree and shrub and plant and bird. Late as it was in the year,



"HASTEN! ONLY ONE DAY YET REMAINS FOR REGISTRATION."

there were still many plants in bloom that added their beauty and fragrance to the scene, and many a highly-colored bird sang his sweetest song as he flew directly over their heads, as though he had come with a special message of good cheer for them in their long journey. Both were nature-lovers, and were ever on the alert for something new in her wondrous domain.

But their conversation came to a quick ending. The sharp ring of a horse's hoofs was heard approaching. A Roman centurion came riding by, lordly, imperious, scornful. Scarcely pausing in his mad flight he shouted to the multitude that still thronged the great highway, "Hasten! Only one day yet remains for the registration. If your names are not recorded you forfeit all!" A pang shot through the hearts of many, and especially of Joseph and Mary. Night was already falling,

and Jerusalem was still twenty-five miles distant, and little Bethlehem, their goal, six miles still farther. With anxious eyes they looked at one another. With a resolute look upon her drawn face, Mary, the Hebrew maiden, said to Joseph, "We must ride on into the night." "Impossible," Joseph protested. "Already you are too worn to travel farther." "But I must," she stoutly declared. "Otherwise we shall lose our little home in Nazareth, and that we can ill afford." Joseph knew it all too well. Rome knew no pity, and particularly with her subject races. Her word was like the laws of the Medes and Persians, which altered not. Trying an ordeal as it was, there was nought else to be done. Time was so precious now that even the night must be as the day to them.

Towards midnight they and some of their neighbors from Nazareth reached a

little sheltered valley and sought a few hours' rest. But with the twittering of the birds at dawn they were again on the march. Their progress was so slow as to seem almost a retracing of their steps, and yet they dared not go faster.

At last, late in the afternoon, when the western sky was all aglow with light, they came in sight of Jerusalem. For the time they forgot their extreme fatigue, forgot their sleepless night, forgot that they had scarcely tasted food for four and twenty hours. They stood transfixed! Before them, built upon seven hills, stood Jerusalem. Upon Mount Zion rose the temple, massive, golden-domed, snowy white with her glistening marbles, the wonder not alone of every faithful orthodox Jew, but of all the world. Today the city and temple, bathed in the glory of the setting sun, shone resplendent. Nothing could

add to their beauty.

Familiar as were both Joseph and Mary with the centuries of their nation's history, they saw pass in review before them the long line of kings who had lived and reigned in this Capital City. Their good deeds shone out upon the canvas of their memory like brilliant stars upon a dark night, while their deeds of depravity were like a dreadful nightmare which was well nigh unforgetable. Prophets, too, rose up before them, strong, fearless, the beacon lights of their generation. As hidden treasures to them were their writings, so carefully preserved in the ancient Jewish manuscripts, and so faithfully memorized from the tender years of childhood. This was holy ground! But tarry they dared not. The sands in the hour-glass were few, and six miles yet remained before them. Around the green slopes of the Mount of

Olives they passed. Over this self-same road King David, their grand-sire, had marched with his conquering host. The feet of Naomi and the royal Ruth had also made sacred this pathway that led to Bethlehem.

As the sun was about to be lost in the sea, Joseph and Mary stood at the end of their journey. A few belated travelers, like themselves, were still registering in Bethlehem. In a few moments they, too, had given a list of their belongings, and were free to seek shelter for the night. A deep sigh of relief escaped from both.

Once outside the booth of registration, they stood in the fast-gathering darkness with heads bowed in silent prayer. Their sense of gratitude was too deep to find expression in words.

During the last two hours the weather had suddenly changed. The warm south

wind which marked the beginning of the day and made it seem like a day in early spring, had been replaced by a sharp, cold blast which blew in angry gusts from the Great Sea, making one feel he could almost hear the wild billows break in their frothing, foaming fury upon the jagged rocks which line the coast of Joppa. Snowflakes were beginning to fill the night air.

There was but one caravansary in the little town of Bethlehem. For generations it had stood there. It was one of the familiar landmarks to every traveler, whether he came from Upper Egypt or ancient Damascus. It was the common camping ground for all. Thither the devout Joseph and Mary turned their steps. How welcome would its shelter prove on such a night as this! Yea, how tenfold welcome!

But how little they knew the man who stood supreme in this shelter of the nations

—Zeresh, the grizzled, gruff, and greedy innkeeper. What a strange character—half Egyptian, half Jewish; a child of the desert, born on an oasis far out in the Great Desert, with the heat of the burning sands in his veins and inordinate covetousness in his heart. His father had been at one time a Jewish priest, and his mother an Egyptian fortune-teller. Repentant, his father had taught him the Hebrew Scriptures and sought to rear him in the true faith, but it was as difficult as facing a sandstorm. However, one thing was certain, the inn which Zeresh kept was clean. It was the pride of his life. Here men found a good resting place. True, he drove a sharp bargain with his guests, but he was obliging. By day or night he would do their bidding, *but always for money.*

On this memorable day when Joseph and Mary had been approaching Bethle-

hem, others, able to travel faster than they, had already arrived at the inn while they were still many miles distant. Early in the day the stream of guests had begun to arrive. In his eagerness for gain, unused places were emptied of tools and implements of all kinds—the accumulation of years. Swift change followed swift change. All possible space must be utilized. And still the guests came. Impatient at delay, he raged at his faithful, hunchback wife, Miriam. She could do nothing quick enough. Twice during the day he had raised his clenched fist to strike her down, but each time she eluded him and escaped unharmed. Once an ugly blow narrowly missed the head of their little three-year-old girl, who in terror was clinging to her mother's dress. "Go, you wretch," he said, as he gave her a push which sent her reeling across the floor; "go and make room

for more." Worn out in body, trembling with fear, and sick in soul, the little Jewess hurried away to prepare more room. As she was fleeing from him, Miriam heard old Zeresh mumble to himself, "*Each must pay my price this day! Each must pay my price!* Unthought-of places were cleared, and by limiting the space to each, the old inn had never given shelter to so many travelers as in this night. The eyes of the innkeeper glittered and glistened with the peculiar light of the wild beast in the forest that has caught its prey. "Cæsar has served me well! Cæsar has served me well! The nation's misfortune is my gain," chuckled old Zeresh as he clinked the coins in the large leathern bag which was suspended from the girdle beneath his tunic.

And yet there was room. Two rich Persian merchants, expected for the past

three days, men who for the last twenty years had made this their resting place, had not arrived. Would they still come?

And then Joseph and Mary appeared before the inn and sought admittance. But as they stood before the darkened entrance on this cold and cheerless night, colder than the chilling wind which blew about them was their reception. Zeresh, the grizzled, gruff and greedy innkeeper, met them under the flickering rays of two torches that were hung in the wall. Oriental politeness at first was his, as he stood face to face with these two belated travelers. A smile played about his large mouth, and a warm welcome was apparently to be theirs; but as Zeresh made a swift but careful scrutiny of them in the dim light and noted their simple garment, the smile vanished and his face grew hard and pitiless.

Joseph stood and pleaded for admittance as only one will plead for a life-companion who is dearer than life itself. In desperation Joseph pledged Zeresh the last shekel in his purse if he could only be granted even the poorest place in the inn. But this offer the innkeeper resolutely refused.

Before the eyes of the covetous Zeresh shone the gold of the opulent Persian merchants, from whom he not only expected to receive a rich reward on this night, but also during the long years yet to come, and this hope outweighed all the arguments Joseph could present.

It seemed as though the heart of Zeresh was carved out of the hardest agate.

The two strangers from Nazareth could in no way find a welcome at the hands of Zeresh. They stood outside. There was no room for them in the inn.

"This is no time to open my door to poor folks. A fool I'd be if I did not gather as many shekels as possible on such a night as this," mumbled the Bethlehem innkeeper as he watched Joseph and Mary disappear in the darkness.

The two expected guests did not arrive. The best place stood vacant.

As Joseph and Mary turned away from the inn, the darkness was doubly dark, and the cheerless wind a hundredfold more cheerless.

As the birds fly home to their nests when the storm is gathering, so was it with the citizens and strangers in Bethlehem.

Joseph now realized that the crisis-hour in his life had come. Assuredly this night would be marked by a great tragedy unless help came, and came speedily. Both were already benumbed by the increasing cold and Joseph knew full well that this

benumbment would soon be followed by that drowsiness which leads the weary traveler to lie down anywhere and go to sleep, but in such a case the sleep is that long sleep from which no one awakes in this life.

If Joseph could not gain admittance to the inn, which was supposed to receive all travelers, could he expect that any other door would be opened to him in so exceedingly small a town as Bethlehem?

He knew not. The prospects seemed to him well nigh hopeless in so tiny a village with its few scattering houses.

With a woman's quick instinct Mary read the thoughts of her protector. Desperate as was their situation, a deep, sure calm reigned in her soul. Far above the storm which sends the clouds scudding across the sky is a calm which no storm, however violent, can reach; and many fath-

oms beneath the surface of the sea is a stillness so great that not a pebble nor a shell is disturbed. Thus was it in the deepest depths of Mary's soul. She was anchored in Jehovah, and knew her anchor would hold. The history of the past was ingrained into her very being, and she knew that as Jehovah had delivered in the past so He would deliver now. With this unshaken conviction, she turned to Joseph, as the wind raged about them, and said, "Fear not Joseph, Jehovah is good and never forsakes His own. Did He not open a path through the Red Sea for our people? Did He not deliver David, our grand-sire, from the lion's mouth? And even Hagar, the bondwoman, from perishing in the wilderness? Has He not pledged His word, saying, 'No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly'? The stars may fall, the sun and

moon fail to give their light, but Jehovah's word shall never fail."

Scarcely had the words died upon her lips when a small, thinly-clad urchin came bounding around the corner of one of the houses. Borne on by the force of the wind and the impetus of his running, ere he was aware he dashed pell-mell into Joseph. Sorely bruised, greatly frightened, thinking it was old Zeresh with whom he had collided, and expecting many a sharp blow and still sharper words for his rudeness, the little fellow scrambled to his feet and was about to redouble his speed when in kindest tones a voice called after his retreating figure, "We are so sorry for thee, my child. Art thou badly bruised?"

It was enough. That little boy's heart flew open in a moment. Curiosity, the kindly feeling awakened by Joseph's words, the love of adventure—a hundred

emotions played riot in this little lad's soul and made flight impossible till he had asked, "And who art thou? And where art thou going? Why art thou not in the inn yonder?"

Patiently Joseph answered the volley of questions. Stamping his sandal with a wrathful ring upon the hard stones which filled the narrow street, the bruised and bleeding boy said, "How cruel old Zeresh is! How pitiless! And such a night as this!" And then, with fine, child-like confidence, he followed the warm impulse of his heart, and placing his little hand within Joseph's, he said, "Come with me. My father is a big man, the best man in the world, and he'll make room for thee."

To the outskirts of Bethlehem Joseph and Mary were led by their unexpected little guide. Up to the side of a rocky slope he brought them. In the side of a

limestone hill there opened a natural gateway. Within could be seen the flickering rays of a rushlight. A man, tall, square-shouldered, muscular, was within the grotto. He stood in the midst of all his earthly goods—a small flock of sheep and lambs, a cow and her young offspring, his faithful donkey, and a shepherd dog. The unusual cold had led him to bring his animals under cover for the night. Hidden from view, preparing the warm evening meal, was his beloved wife, and grouped about her three small boys.

Busy scattering the straw over the stable floor and filling the manger with provender, the keeper of the grotto was unaware of the approach of strangers, until his dog leaped forth into the darkness and filled the silent night with his barking. The owner quickly followed, and at the doorway of the grotto met the two strangers

from far-off Nazareth in Galilee. Micaiah, the keeper of the grotto, would have been a remarkable man in any age, but especially so in this. In these dark days, when it was the common sight to see slaves and criminals expiring in agony upon Roman crosses set up along the great Roman highways; when the border line between Judea and Samaria was never crossed by the orthodox Jew; when the tax-gatherer was a hated outcast; when deformed little children were left in the mountains to be eaten by wild beasts; when Roman Emperor and Roman Governor and High Priest and Pharisee alike valued gold above God, riches above honor; this one man, this simple shepherd of the hills, with his home a grotto, stood uncorrupted.

He was a lineal descendant of that brave Micaiah who had dared to tell the truth even to a black-hearted King Ahab,

though to do so meant impoverishment, imprisonment, and months of torture by slow starvation. Faithfully he had followed the family traditions of love and truth and courage and a stainless life.

Quickly Micaiah realized that as birds driven by a storm seek shelter for the night anywhere, so these strangers had come to him, and he bade them welcome. Who they were and whence they had come he knew not. They were in need, and this was an all-sufficient claim upon his hospitality.

It was the established rule of his household that the best must be for his guests, whomsoever they might be. Accordingly, he led the way into a deep and high room of the grotto, upon the walls of which were suspended numberless relics of his ancestors—swords, musical instruments, drinking cups, tattered and faded banners of his

tribe, the tribe of Judah, and scores of shepherd's crooks and pipes. Five torches, set in various parts of the large room, were soon ablaze, and in their light each one of the relics could be plainly seen. Each object seemed to be telling the glorious and yet pathetic history of the past. A harp, an heirloom of more than three centuries, stood in one corner, having most of the strings broken.

Often, as Micaiah gazed upon these reminders of the past, he had mused, would not the Master arise who would reset the broken strings and reawaken the song in a repentant people? Had not the prophet declared that One would come Who would give "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness?"

Built along one side of the room was a wide manger, partly filled with hay and

grain. Here Micaiah spread some large, coarse, but clean blankets, while his devoted wife lost no time in preparing rice, a hot drink, olives, cheese and bread, adding a few dried figs and dates.

With that fine discernment which a loving heart ever gives, the host perceived that absolute rest was the coveted boon of his guests, and soon found excuse to retire and leave them undisturbed for the night, while he gave final attention to his ewes and lambs. As the thick curtain fell which concealed chamber from chamber in the deep cavern, Micaiah lifted his forefinger in an impressive manner, which his little family knew was a signal for silence.

The simple toys strewn about the grotto floor were quietly gathered up and laid aside, and after a whispered recital of some of the choicest Hebrew legends, which the children loved to have repeated again and

again, they, too, went to slumberland.

Micaiah and Jochebed, his ever loyal wife, were left alone. In subdued tones they spoke of the stirring events of the day. Never had they seen so many people in Bethlehem, not even during the Feast Days of the Passover. To them it was not surprising the village inn could hold no more guests.

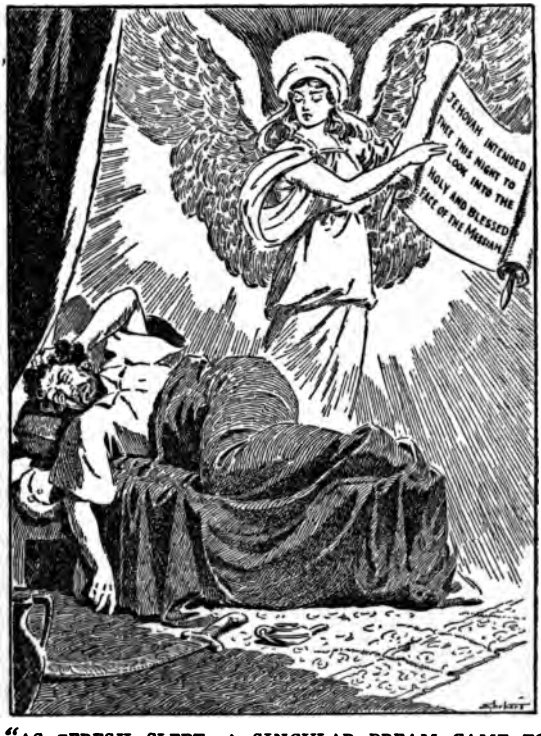
The welcome accorded the two strangers from distant Nazareth was to them a matter of course. For the past twenty-five years this grotto had been a Cave of Adullam. Although numbered among earth's poor, a simple shepherd people, they had made many rich, and the path that led to their humble dwelling was beaten hard by many feet. At last they, too, slept—the deep, peaceful sleep of a well-earned rest.

And Zeresh, the gruff, grizzled and greedy inkeeper, likewise slept. Hidden

in the thick folds of his tunic was a leathern bag containing his treasure. Never in so short a time had he received so great riches. Even in his sleep he chuckled over his gain.

While he slept, in the darkness of the night his terrified wife crept silently from the inn, taking her sleeping little girl in her arms, and fled to the home of a cousin living on an adjoining street. There she would snatch a few hours' sleep ere he awoke.

As Zeresh slept, a singular dream came to him. Before him rose a palace of marvelous beauty. Massive columns of glistening porphyry and malachite supported the building. Floors of shining black and white marble appeared in each spacious room, and the side walls and ceiling were formed from the choicest cedar. Antique furniture of strange design and priceless value, such as only a King Solomon could



"AS ZERESH SLEPT, A SINGULAR DREAM CAME TO HIM."

possess, stood in profusion in every room of the royal dwelling. Hangings of gold and rich embroidery and costly needlework marked the entrance to the succession of rooms, while rare plants stood in a hundred embrasures, adding their beauty and fragrance to the scene. Scattered over the smooth floor, like sands of the sea, were beautiful golden coins, so bright and shining it was evident they were fresh from the hands of the goldsmith. Zeresh trembled with joy. His energy had been rewarded by this beautiful palace, and, in addition, gold without measure. What more could he desire? But gradually the scene changed. Covering the floor of shining marble, the massive pillars of malachite and porphyry, the walls and ceilings of cedarwood, and overspreading each golden coin, appeared a green mould. Had his palace suddenly become a swamp? Thus

it seemed, for springing up from each coin was seen a tiny white plant which grew with the rapidity of the mushroom. As these plants took shape they were seen to be exactly like the *monotropa uniflora*, commonly known as the "corpse plant" or "Indian pipe." How uncanny they seemed! And worst of all, a poisonous odor of deadly power emanated from each plant, dulling his ears, dimming his sight, benumbing his feelings, and stupefying his brain. It seemed to Zeresh as though a slow paralysis were creeping upon him. And then—walking in the midst of the palace, with flaming eyes fixed upon Zeresh, appeared an angel, tall, commanding, stern of visage. In the center of the large dining hall he paused. With awe and a sinking fear gripping his heart, Zeresh followed his every movement. Drawing from underneath his arm a heavy book, each

page of which was embossed with large raised golden letters, he opened the book near the middle, and pointing with his long forefinger to the top of the page, read: "ZERESH, THE INKEEPER OF BETHLEHEM. Jehovah intended thee to give shelter this cold night to two weary travelers from Nazareth in Galilee. Thou didst close and bolt and bar the door of thy heart against them. Thou hast sinned the deep and awful sin—the sin of covetousness; and hast added thereto the blind and stubborn unbelief of thy stiffnecked people. Jehovah intended thee this night to look into the holy and blessed face of the Messiah, about whom thy father hath told thee for many years, and to Whom he sought to lead thee. He was to be born in this thine inn. But now the Desire of nations is forever hidden from thee. Thou hast rejected Him."

As the angel was about to withdraw, a piercing cry was uttered by Zeresh. "Mercy! Mercy! Have mercy!" he shouted. With the swiftness of the light a look of tenderest pity came into the face of the angel, and, lifting up his strong right hand as if in blessing, he said, "Jehovah's mercy is even for the most sinful, for He declares, 'Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto Jehovah and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.' If thou wilt truly repent, thou shalt even yet taste of Jehovah's mercy; but if thou dost still harden thine heart, His wrath shall abide upon thee." And then—the angel was gone.

By this time Zeresh was fully awake. That Jehovah had spoken to him through his singular dream he doubted not, and

that he stood upon the brink of the awful precipice, this, too, he did not question. Nevertheless, the door of mercy was not wholly closed against him.

The habits of a lifetime, however, are not cast aside in a day. Instinctively Zeresh felt for his bag of gold. It was gone! Under cover of the night it had been stolen by one of his guests. Gone, also were his wife and child; where, he knew not. At first an almost uncontrollable rage seized him. As of yore, the spirit of vengeance was about to master him; and then he recalled the final words of the angel: "If thou wilt truly repent, thou shalt even yet taste of Jehovah's mercy; but if thou dost harden thine heart, His wrath shall abide upon thee."

Zeresh stood wrapped in profound thought. As some tall cedar torn by the tempest, so was it with him. The contend-

ing forces of two worlds were battling for the mastery in his soul. Which would prevail—greed, hatred and unbelief, or faith, hope and love? Would he in the end prove a child of the night or a child of the day?

* * * * *

Micaiah, the keeper of the grotto, as he glided across the mysterious line which divides a man's wakeful hours from his hours of sleep, slept the deep, satisfying sleep of a man who has toiled diligently and lies down in the consciousness of work squarely done, and in the knowledge of a sincere effort to sweeten the lives of others. So lost in sleep was he that he did not hear, in the silent hours of the night, smothered cries of anguish; but what he failed to hear did not escape the trained ear of Jochebed, his loyal wife, and with the swiftness of a gazelle she leaped to the side of Mary, the espoused wife of Joseph, and was a true

"mother of Israel" that night.

And still Micaiah lay wrapped in unconsciousness of the wonders taking place about him; and as he slept, he also dreamed. To him, too, appeared, not one angel, but five. As they drew near it seemed as though the radiance of a thousand rainbows was bursting upon him and his family. The thin coverlets overspreading his children were all aglow with light. Their bronzed faces and hands were illumined with the refulgent glory of another world.

An unseen door had opened by an unseen hand, and through that open door rushed the beauty of a light such as he had never before beheld. His breath came quick and fast. His big rough hands quivered with excitement. What might it all mean? As the first angel spoke, he said, "Thy name is Micaiah. Henceforth thou

shalt be called *Judah*, for in thy midst is born this night Him Who for all ages shall be known as 'the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.' *His strength shall be thy strength.*"

The second angel stepped forward and said, "Thy flocks and thy herds shall multiply as the flocks and herds of Jacob, and thy fields shall yield an hundredfold."

The third angel quickly followed, saying, "Thy children shall honor and obey thee all thy days, and shall bear the glory of thy name through all future generations."

The fourth angel added, "And the days of thy faithful, loving wife shall be greatly lengthened, and she shall comfort thee all thy way."

The fifth angel concluded, "Thy portion at last shall be with the just. The *believing heart* is granted thee, and thou shalt be forever with thy Redeemer, whom

this night thou hast sheltered."

A joy unspeakable shone in each angel face, and that joy swept through the soul of Micaiah and made it as though a thousand harps were playing in sweetest unison. The joy of the angels was too great to find expression in the few words which they had uttered. Suddenly they began to sing—

"O, little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by:
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light:
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

"For Christ is born of Mary,
And, gathered all above,
While mortals sleep the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.

And peace to men on earth.
O, morning stars, together
Proclaim the holy birth!
And praises sing to God, the King,

"How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in."

As they finished and were about to withdraw from the sleeper's sight, they said, "Some day a man will be born with a soul so pure and a life so noble that he will catch this song from our lips and hand it down to earth." And then—they were gone.

Micaiah, with heart leaping for gladness, awoke. Softly he arose from his bed. Quietly he wrapped his garments about

him. With noiseless tread he stepped to the heavy curtain which concealed his guests from view, and gently drew it aside. All was still! No, all was not still. A man, in broken tones, was praying. Micaiah was chained to the spot. He did not wish to intrude, but seemed powerless to move, and so overheard Joseph's prayer. It was this: "Jehovah, Thou hast given us Thy Son this night! Thou hast fulfilled Thy promise to us and to Thy people. We adore Thee. We bless Thy name. Make known Thy Son to all the earth. Amen." Mingled with this prayer were the sobs and tears of a strong man overcome by the greatness of the emotions which shook his powerful frame.

As Joseph rose from his knees, the two men looked into each other's faces; the one, with cheeks wet with tears, the other with face radiant with the light of heaven.

They clasped hands. They flung their arms about one another and wept together, even as David and Jonathan wept upon each other's neck. A common hope made them one. Together they knelt before the Babe of Bethlehem. Mary and Jochebed, too, joined in their adoration. They were the first worshipers at the feet of the new-born King.

Rising from his knees, Micaiah whispered, "I must hasten, and tell the good news to the shepherds out upon the plains. Long we have waited and long we have prayed together for His coming."

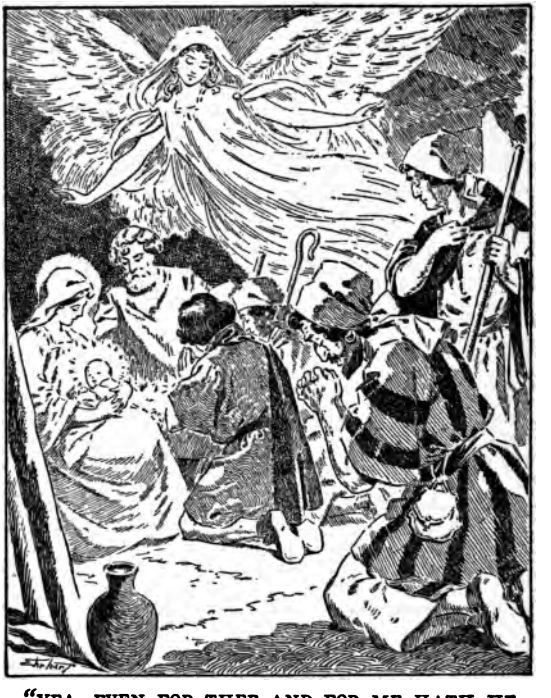
But he did not need to go. Already the shepherds were at the door. To them also had the angels brought the glad tidings, "Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the City of David, a Saviour, which is

Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

In a *manger* they were to find the Hope of Israel! Quickly their thoughts flew to Micaiah. In all Bethlehem and the hill country of Judea the shepherds knew of no one so good and true as their own Micaiah. To him they hastened, and within the rock-hewn chambers of his grotto they, too, found the Christ-Child. A new and wondrous joy flooded their souls. A new hope, brighter than the stars they watched by night, now inspired them. One passion took possession of them. Others must know the Christ-Child.

As they turned and were about to go forth to spread the glad news of the Christ-Child, a strange sight met their eyes. An old man stood close behind them. It was Zeresh, the innkeeper.

Micaiah, more zealous than the other shepherds, had quietly left his companions while they were still wrapped in wonder, and had hastened through the little village of Bethlehem, telling the marvelous story of the coming of the Christ-Child. When the heart is sorely troubled man will give heed. So it was with Zeresh. Jehovah had ploughed deep, and prepared his heart for the new truth. Attentively he listened to the thrilling story of the coming of the Messiah as it was rapidly told by Micaiah. *Zeresh believed.* The Christ at last had not knocked in vain. The innkeeper was no longer a child of the night, but of the day. No time was lost in seeking his greatly-wronged wife and child. Earnestly and sincerely he entreated and obtained their forgiveness, and they, too, turned their feet towards the Bethlehem manger and the Hope of the nations.



"YEA, EVEN FOR THEE AND FOR ME HATH HE COME."

As Zeresh gazed upon the Christ-Child, in his eyes shone a look of unutterable wonder, and upon his face was the glory of heaven.

"Even for me He has come; even for *me*," he said, in broken tones. Stepping to his side and grasping him by the hand Micaiah added, ""Tis true. The Master Musician has come to reset the broken strings in every heart and reawaken the song in every life." At the same time the tender-hearted Joseph drew near, and wrapping his strong arm of love about Zeresh, said, "It is written, 'The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings. Under His burning rays all cold and frost and snow and ice will vanish and the soul's glad summer time shall come with its bursting buds and ripening fruits. The sunshine of His love and mercy is for all. Yea, even for thee and for me hath He come.' "